

# Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

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Rev. Bjug Harstad memorial stone  
at Valle, Norway

This issue of *Oak Leaves* continues the biography of the Rev. Bjug Harstad (1848-1933) who was elected as the first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1918. History finds him, one hundred years ago, in the gold fields of the Klondike

The previous issue provided a summary of his life until that day in February 1898 when he left for the Klondike in an attempt to "solve financial problems" for Pacific Lutheran University which had been founded in 1890 by the Norwegian Synod. The cost of construction and the financial panic of the 1890s left a debt for which Bjug Harstad, the school's president, felt responsible.

The letters, written for publication in the *Pacific Herald*, tell the tale of his journey to the Klondike and also of the reason for this momentous journey.

This issue continues to tell his story after he returned to Parkland, Washington in 1899.

Our thanks to his grandson, Dr. Peter T. Harstad, for preparing the biography.

## Bjug Harstad

first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *continued*

Back home in the summer of 1899, Bjug asked forgiveness for going to Alaska without permission from the Pacific District of the Norwegian Synod and for the fact that the venture "had not proved successful." He relinquished the presidencies of the district and of the Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) Association, but remained steadfastly loyal to both. His priorities for the new century were pastoral work in the Parkland congregation and teaching religion, Bible history, the Augsburg Confession, and Norwegian at the college.

Bjug and Guro completed their family 10 January 1902 with the birth of a son. They named him Adolph Marius after his sister, Marie, who had died of tuberculosis the previous September. The name Adolph sounds like the Greek word for brother, thus brother of Marie.'

Both the college and the congregation thrived during the first decade of the twentieth century. As part of PLU's June 1910 commencement ceremony, officials unveiled an oil painting of "the founder" and placed it in Old Main (later renamed Harstad Hall).

The following month Bjug's Parkland congregation dedicated a beautiful church in the presence of a thousand members and guests. The structure was nearly paid for so "Pastor Harstad gladdened the hearts of the great

crowd" by recommending that the dedication offering go to missions. The years of hard physical and mental work of pioneering, building, and fund raising appeared to be over for Bjug.

There was also time to enjoy domestic comforts in the mild climate of Puget Sound. In 1900 Bjug and Guro used proceeds from the sale of their North Dakota homestead to purchase a

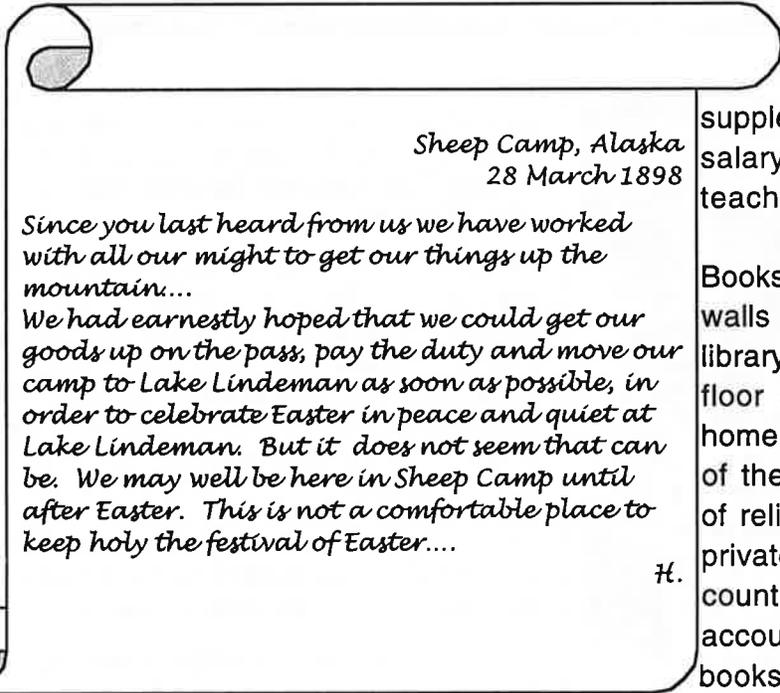
spacious home and twenty-five acres on a hillside overlooking Parkland. Here, with help from their boys, they tended an orchard and cultivated many varieties of trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetables. They also kept a horse and several cows.

Income from Guro's dairy operation

supplemented Bjug's salary as pastor and teacher.

Bookshelves lined the walls of an office and library on the second floor of the Harstad home. Bjug owned "one of the largest collections of religions works in private hands in this country," reported one account. "Some of the books were listed at

\$1000 apiece" and one volume "dated back almost to the Guttenberg Bible." Bjug enjoyed the pleasures of his study. In one corner he kept a collection of long stemmed pipes for the enjoyment of visiting pastors and friends. He smoked very little, practiced moderation in all things, and, according to his children, pushed himself back from the table while still a little hungry.



Sheep Camp, Alaska  
28 March 1898

*Since you last heard from us we have worked with all our might to get our things up the mountain... We had earnestly hoped that we could get our goods up on the pass, pay the duty and move our camp to Lake Lindeman as soon as possible, in order to celebrate Easter in peace and quiet at Lake Lindeman. But it does not seem that can be. We may well be here in Sheep Camp until after Easter. This is not a comfortable place to keep holy the festival of Easter....*

⌘.

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Board of Directors: Erling Teigen (Chairman), Joseph Abrahamson, Craig Ferkenstad, Norman Holte, Gerhard Lee, Albin Levorson, Amanda Madson, George Orvick, Lois Pieper  
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**Membership**  
All membership renewals due on June 1  
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Life: \$200

Well educated and thoroughly American, the next generation of Harstads was beginning to make its mark. Three of the boys played professional baseball, one of whom, pitched for the Cleveland Indians in 1915. (Ty Cobb, the first major league batter Oscar Theander faced, rattled a double off the right field fence.) It satisfied the mature couple when their youngest son decided to prepare for the ministry and when the older boys found good wives and brought grandchildren to Parkland. The two daughters, Louise and Lydia, became nurses committed to caring for their parents as they aged.

Bjug spent the 1910-11 academic year filling in for his friend, Prof. H. G. Stub, at the Norwegian Synod's Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Little did he realize that this was the calm before a

furious theological storm that would deprive him of a tranquil retirement. It all started when three bodies of Norwegian-American Lutherans (Norwegian Synod, Hauge Synod, and United Norwegian Lutheran Church) developed plans to merge into a single body by 1917, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran

Reformation. But the document which was to be the basis for the merger compromised the Biblical teaching that man comes to faith through God's grace alone.

Bjug stood with a

minority of Norwegian Synod pastors who opposed a merger on that basis.

He also went with an even smaller minority to a tent on the Iowa/Minnesota border in June 1918 to organize what is now the ELS. Present on that occasion were thirteen clergymen, most of them without congregations, plus laymen, most of them from scattered, strife-ridden congregations in the rural Midwest. These "scattered sheep"

electd Bjug their president whereupon he extended comfort through words of the prophet Jeremiah: "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." Leaders of the merged

Sheep Camp, Alaska  
April 4, 1898

Dear Herald:

*Yesterday was Palm Sunday and together with our friends from San Francisco, we were edifying ourselves in our Tacoma friends' tent in song, prayer and meditation upon God's Word. We had just finished when the tragic news came from the mountain pass that several people had perished in a snow slide...*

*A man and his wife tried to save themselves by fleeing downward. The woman perished while the man was uninjured. Thus death strikes here and there. To many it seems death strikes blindly, but, thank God, our Savior overpowers death and holds the keys to life and death in His merciful hands. Seriousness is stamped on most faces today. One does not now hear the unbounded cursing and swearing and abuse of dumb animals which has reverberated all along the way before.*

*We walk in danger all the way; we walk also toward death all the way. One fleeting breath can end our way.*

*But we are in good spirits and try to believe and confess: "I walk with angels all the way; they shield me and befriend me; All Satan's pow'r is held at bay when heavenly hosts attend me; They are my sure defense, all fear and sorrow hence! Unharmd by foes, do what they may, I walk with angels all the way." "I walk with Jesus all the way, His guidance never fails me; within His wounds I find a stay when Satan's power assails me."*

H.

Norwegian Lutheran Church of America regarded the tenuous "little Norwegian synod" as an insignificant backwater left behind by the prevailing current toward a General Motors of American Lutheranism.

Back in Parkland, Bjug turned "three score years and ten" on 17 December 1918. Friends advised him to come to his senses and turn his back on an organization that had neither right nor reason to exist. Only a small remnant of the congregation followed their aging pastor into the humble synod of a thousand souls. Another blow fell when PLU and all of its property went into the merger. With a heavy heart Bjug pulled Adolph out of the preparatory department of the very school he had worked so hard to establish and maintain. Such was the consequence of striving for doctrinal purity.

For four years (until 1922) Bjug served as president of what is now the ELS. Along with the office came hard work, including heavy correspondence and frequent travel. In some ways the work was similar to organizing congregations back in Dakota Territory, but now the geographical scale was much larger. Not the least of Bjug's satisfactions involved working with others to set up two synod professorships, one at Dr. Martin Luther College at New Ulm, Minnesota (the Wisconsin Synod's teacher training institution) and the other at Concordia College, St. Paul, Minnesota (a Missouri Synod institution with a pre-theological program). From the outset synod people would not be freeloaders nor

Sheep Camp, Alaska  
April 7, 1897

*To All Friends of Pacific Lutheran University,  
Since, God willing, we will soon move into the Yukon Valley and do not know what may happen, whether or not we can receive letters or send letters readily, I feel an urge to thank earnestly all those who have supported the school on the West Coast in any way.*

*I am intensely sorry that those who have bought property on account of the school cannot now sell and get their money back. I need hardly say that neither I nor any of the others who have carried on the work for the school would have undertaken what we did had we been able to foresee the hard times that would come. I do not believe that the disappointments can be as bitter and humiliating for anyone as they have been for us. Were it within our power to compensate you for these disappointments it would be our greatest pleasure to do so.*

*But, unfortunately, we cannot.*

*To those who have loaned money to the school I should also like to offer my sincere thanks for your patience and indulgence.*

*I also feel bitterly the injury that has been brought about by our inability to repay*

letter continues ...



*Pacific Lutheran University  
constructed in 1894*

would they neglect the education of their young men and women, particularly for work in the church. The rewards were compounded for Bjug when his son Adolph went off to Concordia St. Paul in 1921. (Thereafter, Adolph followed his father's footsteps to Concordia Theological Seminary at St. Louis, became a minister of the Gospel, and remained on the ELS clergy roster from 1926 until 1988.)

During and after his synod presidency Bjug shared his convictions in a variety of writings. The two most ambitious were *Pioneer Days and other events briefly sketched for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Synod for the Norwegian Evang. Lutheran Church of America* (67 pages, Mankato, 1928) and *Is the Bible Reliable? Vital Questions answered by Scientists, Christian Believers, and The Bible* (87 pages, Parkland, 1929). The former, intended primarily for the members of his own

synod, explored the roots of the theological crisis of 1917. The latter, written for a broader readership, answered the basic question boldly and in the affirmative, and demonstrated that Bjug's mind remained active into his eighties. The fact that he continued to research and write after his valuable library burned in 1920 is a tribute to the buoyancy of his spirit.

Bjug knew all too well what was involved in the founding and maintenance of colleges. Therefore he did not initially support the synod's acquisition of Bethany Lutheran College in 1927. Others did, and he eventually backed them. He retired from the ministry in 1928 but continued to preach on various occasions.

letter continued ...

*according to our promises. To report our calculations and how we, from time to time, dared to raise such loans and what reasons we had will not be of much advantage. Therefore I can only thank you all and say that it is my firm belief and hope that the merciful heavenly Father will not permit us to become swindlers in your sight, but that He will train us all in faith and hope and charity. This both we who owe you and you to whom we are indebted need. I ask you kindly also to rejoice that your money has been and is in the service of a great and important cause that may witness and bear fruit for many generations. The money has not been squandered or speculated away. The Lord has preserved the school building in which the money is invested. You may call the school yours and the good it does the fruit of your labor.*

*You know that I am now on a peculiar journey. Both you and I believe in that Lord to whom the world and its abundance belongs. Should He desire to allot to me any of that riches which He has clearly deposited in many places here in the far north, then you ought to know that it is to be devoted to the repayment of the debt to you. If this could happen, several years work would be sacrificed with pleasure. We have tried many other solutions. Now we will try if the Lord will not find a solution for us here. I do not believe He will permit me to die as a swindler.*

*Finally, I thank you with all my heart for all help. The Lord Himself will repay you.*

*With a brotherly greeting, I remain yours in Christ.*

B. Harstad

Sheep Camp, Alaska  
April 17, 1898

*Who has a better reason to travel?*

*Many are surprised that the undersigned should go to Alaska among gold seekers. I should like to ask those if they know anyone who has a better reason for going into the gold fields than I.*

*I suppose we can all agree that there are large fortunes of gold deposited in many places here in Alaska. This is clearly proven. Moreover, we may also agree that gold and silver as well as the earth and its fullness are the Lord's, that He desires that man should benefit thereby and that His gifts should be used in His service for building the Church.*

*Furthermore, it is firmly impressed both upon men and many others that our school on the Coast is responsible for large sums of borrowed money that must be repaid. We are in duty bound to try every reasonable means of fulfilling our obligations.*

*Perhaps it is the Lord's will to unlock for us some of the earthly treasures that are deposited here in Alaska.*

*That must be worth an earnest attempt. But one cannot expect that others will or can go on the same errand that I both can and will. Besides I can work for the mission and bring the food of God's Word to many who wish this nourishment on the way. There are some here who not only belong to Christian congregations, but also appreciate the unadulterated milk of God's Word.*

*Besides these things I might also mention that I have for a long time been worn out and tired. When both colleagues and other Christians can undertake long, expensive and dangerous journeys to foreign countries for rest and pleasure, then, I dare say, this journey can be defended much easier. It is both a rest and pleasure as we, by the grace and power of God, hope to be rescued from great pecuniary distress and worry. If we are disappointed in this hope, which we must naturally be prepared for, we still have the satisfaction that a serious attempt to fulfil our promises has been made.*

*Should some find that the above mentioned things are not good reason, I beg that they will not judge me too harshly but try to put themselves exactly in my place, especially in respect to my obligations toward Pacific Lutheran University.*

*The harder the times have been and the more difficult it became to pay the interest and principal of our debt the more general it has become to make me almost alone responsible for the debt and for many other mistakes which we all, under the changed circumstances, both see and bitterly regret. As long as times were good and everything looked fairly promising everyone was as well satisfied as we. Although we both in writing and orally almost to abomination publicly and*

letter continues ...

letter continued ...

*privately reported both what we were thinking of doing and how we did it we heard both publicly and privately: Carry on! Complete the work begun! But when adversity and distress came, then many sang a different song, yes, the whole undertaking has been wished into the depth of the sea. This is not said to upbraid anyone, but in order that also these things are taken into consideration when passing judgment upon my present journey.*

*It was not my idea that a school should be built on the West Coast, nor was it my decision that I should have anything to do with the matter. This decision was made by the General Conference in Decorah, Iowa, in October 1889. After I, in accordance with this decision had come to Washington and in association with several others had accepted an offer, it was not my wish that I should continue the work and remain on the Coast more than two years. It was resolutions made without my request, first by pastors on the West Coast, then by the Norwegian Synod together with the congregations I was then serving. Neither did I vote to build so big.*

*But this, that I against my wish and inclination was given the duty of carrying on the work does not in the least relieve me from feeling the heavy responsibility.*

*It will not help to complain about those who have given me the task while other could have done it much better. I thought then, as I do now, that it was my sacred duty not to act in accordance with my wish or inclination, but with diligence to carry out the work assigned to me to the best of my ability. I will, with God's help, continue to do this. The fact that I am now the only one left of the original Board of Trustees increases my feeling of responsibility for the debt.*

*When I consider the severe pressure that is put on colleagues and many others to pay the debt, then everything indicates that it is my sacred duty to make every possible effort to free us from the distress and misery we are in on account of the debt. A couple of years of work and toil here in Alaska is as nothing if we can but come out of debt.*

*My duties at the school, in the Parkland Congregation and in the Pacific District are taken care of even though I travel in Alaska.*

*I hope all will approve of this attempt and further the act with believing prayers and intercessions. The cause itself is the Lord's and although He leads it through many afflictions He is still the gracious Father and merciful Provider who will, at some time in one way or another, lead us out of them again.*

B. Harstad

In his later years Bjug loved to reminisce. In his later years Bjug He kept up a lively correspondence—even with former antagonists. In his surviving correspondence he expressed no regret for walking away from the merger of 1917 or for casting his lot with the “little synod.” When former North Dakota parishioners asked him about hardships during the pioneer days he responded that he had swum icy rivers, passed through prairie fires, and survived blizzards, but “I encountered no severe hardships.”

Bjug died 20 June 1933 at age 84; his wife died five months later. A friend who went into the 1917 merger borrowed words from Tennyson for Bjug’s epitaph:

“He never sold the truth  
to serve the hour,  
Nor paltered with Eternal God  
for power.”

21 April 1898  
Sheep Camp, Alaska

*Today, finally, we have gotten our provisions and other equipment over Chilkoot down to Crater Lake in Queen Victoria’s domain. We are glad that we have come so far. It is not easy work to carry 3500 pounds on the back over the steep mountain pass. There is still much snow although it is thawing, especially down in the valley. On the high mountains that we are now crossing the snow lies untouched. I dare say we will camp on the snow for another month. We are in good health and busy. In the evening our entire face and lips smart as though we are sunburned. That comes from the reflection of the sun on the snow. We are now about as weather-beaten and reddish brown as Indians. Otherwise we are vigorous and have had good luck and have made good progress...*

H.



*This photo shows some of the estimated 22,000 gold seekers inching toward the 3,500 foot summit of Chilkoot Pass*

Dawson, N.W. Territory, Canada

Oct. 14, 1898

Dear Herald:

This day, the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, is so significant for friends of our Synod\* that one can rejoice in it even in these distant and cold regions. Although my partner, H. Strand, and I who are alone now that Otis Larsen and H. Lien have returned home are very busy putting our winter cabin in order, we are having a holiday today. We try as well as we can to rejoice in the good things the Lord in His mercy has granted our church and thereby us also.

The first snow fell here the 21<sup>st</sup> of September. It had covered the higher ridges before that. We had barely started building our little winter cabin. We moved in the 28<sup>th</sup> of September although we had neither put in the windows nor hung the door. After one has lived in a tent from the middle of February to the 28<sup>th</sup> of September and wandered here and there, sometimes sleeping on the bare ground under the open sky, then it was a festive day when we moved with our luggage and good sacks into something that is called a house.

When we consider this building it looks wretched and we are involuntarily invited to call it the earthly house of this tabernacle. Yet it is wonderful to have it in this snow and cold. But it is not our home. It is good enough to stay in overnight and over winter, but it can never be our permanent residence or home. It is a pleasure, yet wonderful, to know this, but it is most wonderful to believe and know that "If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven, if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked." 2 Cor. 5, 1-3

Considering the circumstances we live very well in our hut, and Herald is asked to greet all my old friends of the pioneer days in the Red River Valley. I am living over again, with great pleasure, those cozy days in cellars, sod huts and low houses with sod roofs. I congratulate you on your present splendid homes and farms. I hope the old, humble self-sacrifice and love of work for the welfare of the church will now bear for you and your children rich, everlasting and God-pleasing fruit...

The bold and able dentist from La Crosse, Wis., Dr. Lee, was quite seriously ill this summer, but is now long since well. Four weeks ago, he, together with a Jew, Irishman and an American, went hunting. They went up the Klondike River 80 or 90 miles. After an absence of four weeks they have just recently returned well supplied with moose meat. They shot three: a large buck that dressed out at about 300 pounds and two calves. Dr. Lee shot the large buck and one calf and was so kind as to present the horns to the Lutheran University. It is an exceptionally stately and large pair of horns with a spread of some over five feet and has fourteen points. The palmations are over one foot wide. Dr. Lee deserves much thanks for this gift. I hope to be able to send it to the school sometime.

A friendly greeting to all readers.

B.H.

\* October 14, 1894 was the date of the dedication of the main building at PLU; and, coincidentally was the founding date of Luther College in 1861.

Dawson, N.W. Territory,  
Jan. 25, 1899

*A Christmas in Klondike.*

Christmas has great significance also here near the Arctic Circle among gold diggers of all faiths and innumerable forms of godlessness and skepticism. Not only those who wish to be Christians, but also others in their own way and at their own conveniences try to lift up their hearts with joy and gladness.

But since it is difficult, if not impossible, for the heart and soul to be joyful when the body is in want, everyone tries to satisfy the reasonable demands of the body and hereby help the spirit attain real festive joy. Naturally this is true not only in Klondike, but everywhere. Since the body, in this cold climate and hard work, needs an excessive amount of food which tastes exceptionally good, this is truer here than in any other place the writer has any accurate knowledge of.

It is also true that one does not have to make great demands in order to feel a delightful change. There are many honorable people here, some of them accustomed to better things, that are glad and well satisfied if they can only buy a soup bone and make a feast for themselves and a friend whom they wish to invite for Christmas.

It is possible to understand this when one remembers that many work hard and have for a long time lived on poorly prepared dishes of beans, ham, bread, pancakes, oatmeal mush, sugar, coffee and tea. If one has a little butter, milk, dried potatoes, rice and fruit he feels he lives well, especially if he has a good, well lighted and warm cabin or log house. Some still live in tents and poorly constructed huts. When the thermometer goes down to 50 degrees below 0 or 80 below freezing, as it has several times this winter, then it is not very comfortable or pleasant in these dark huts.

Of the great number of gold diggers in these narrow valleys one to fifty miles from Dawson City very few have seen the sun since the middle of November. During Christmas there is daylight only three or four hours during the middle of the day. The sun shines only on the mountain peaks and here and there a little while in the valleys...

We had two guests for Christmas, a Swede and a Fin; one was from Chicago, the other from Fern Hill, Wash. We had no Christmas tree nor did we have any of our families with us, but we tried to rejoice in the Savior, knowing that He would gladden and bless them even though we were not there to do so.

Christmas Eve we had two candles burning instead of one. Then it seemed our hut was doubly comfortable. It is but 10 x 12 feet without floor and without a window. Instead of windows we have a little aperture in the door and a large one in the wall. A piece of thin cloth from a flour sack is stretched across each. Although hoar-frost and ice form on the cloth we get a little light - enough to make dinner at noon.

The undersigned is now moving up on Eldorado and will live with P. Olson and Berg from Tacoma and Pederson and Hagenson from California. A mile from them I will work on a bench claim that Rindal and I own on French Hill.

Every Sunday we have services with Olson and Waldal from Seattle.  
Wishing all Herald readers a Happy and Blessed New Year I remain  
Yours truly

B.H.

*Pacific Herald,  
September 1, 1899*

*Proceeds from the Alaska Journey*

*No doubt, there are many Herald readers who ask if our school on the Pacific Coast received financial help from my journey. They certainly have a right to have an answer, and I am sorry that nothing has been reported before. Unfortunately, the school has not yet received any financial help from my trip. The reason is that the Lord has not seen fit to give us any of the gold in Klondike. It is true, the undersigned owns a half interest in three claims and is the sole owner of another. From these the Lord can, if he wills, give the school all it needs. Two of these claims have not yet been tested or opened. The other two have been investigated a little.*

*One claim promises nothing and will therefore revert to the government unless someone makes a strike in the vicinity next winter. The other is more promising. Work on it will be resumed as soon as it is cold enough. Nothing could be done this summer because of gas which does not hinder the work after cold weather has set in. What the Lord will grant us from these attempts is in His hands. My interests there are cared for by a dependable young man who had decided to stay there another year. What they produce will go to the school. It must be understood that the school has not risked anything. In case the school does not get anything from these attempts it has no expenses on that account.*

*Besides these claims, I have a "Lunch House," on the Bonanza, eight miles from Dawson. This provided the money for my return journey and if sold will return to me the expenses I had on the trip.*

*So, I hope, no injury has been done. Yet, I am intensely sorry that my undertaking has caused dissatisfaction and concern for many, and for this I ask forgiveness.*

B.H.

The third annual meeting of the ELS Historical Society  
will be conducted Saturday, June 19, 1999  
at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota

Watch for details and plan to attend!

All annual memberships renewals  
for the ELS Historical Society  
are due on June 1 of each year.



Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
ELS Historical Society  
6 Browns Court  
Mankato, MN 56001

TO

PRES & MRS GEO ORVICK  
1117 LORI LANE  
MANKATO MN 56001



PICTURED AT LEFT IS A  
BRIDE IN THE WEDDING  
COSTUME THAT WAS USED  
IN NORWAY. THE HEAD  
GEAR WAS A SOLID SILVER  
CROWN WHICH WAS  
RENTED FOR THE  
CEREMONY. THIS CROWN  
WAS OF SUCH WEIGHT  
THAT IT TOOK A STIFF  
NECK TO CARRY IT AND  
OFTEN THE BRIDE WOULD  
FAINT FROM THE HEAVY  
LOAD.



SUBMITTED BY  
RON MATHISON